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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [PREL](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: TUNISIAN CIVIL SOCIETY URGES SOLIDARITY TO ADVANCE
DEMOCRACY

REF: A. TUNIS 1402

- [1](#)B. TUNIS 1308
- [1](#)C. TUNIS 1204
- [1](#)D. TUNIS 1155
- [1](#)E. TUNIS 388

Classified By: AMBASSADOR WILLIAM HUDSON FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) AND (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: The recent national congress of the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women provided a unique opportunity for independent Tunisian civil society activists to gather and express their mutual aspirations to further democracy and freedom in Tunisia. More than ten legal and illegal civil society entities were represented at the event and official remarks focused on the importance of working together to achieve common goals related to democracy, human rights and political freedoms. Despite the challenges of organizing and executing such an event, the Congress was a positive achievement for Tunisian civil society. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) Nearly all of the major independent civil society organizations attended the June 9 opening session of the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD) National Congress, at the invitation of the ATFD. From the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH) and the Bar Association (Ref C) to the Tunisian General Worker's Union (UGTT, Ref D) and the Tunisian branch of Amnesty International, approximately ten to fifteen independent organizations were represented at the ATFD opening session. Several illegal civil society entities were also present, including the unrecognized Tunisian Journalists Union (SJT), the National Council for Liberties (CNLT), and the International Association for the Protection of Political Prisoners (AISPP). In total, approximately 100 individuals attended the Congress' opening session, including about sixty members of the ATFD, who represented a wide variety of Tunisians -- from journalists to students, lawyers to labor union members. The gathering of such a significant group of independent activists did not go unnoticed by Tunisian authorities, which deployed between ten and twenty plain clothed security officials to observe the arrival and departure of guests from the street outside the ATFD headquarters in Tunis. While many remarked on their presence, no one in attendance reported any obstruction or harassment.

[1](#)3. (C) ATFD President Ahlem Belhaj, who gave the opening remarks, began by apologizing for the cramped quarters of the session: attendees were crowded into two small rooms and the adjoining hallway of the ATFD headquarters. Belhaj said the ATFD spent several months attempting to secure a larger location to convene its national congress, but no hotel was willing to rent it space (Ref E). (NOTE: Civil society activists allege that the GOT instructs hotels not to allow independent groups -- including those that are legally recognized -- to hold events in their facilities. END NOTE.)

While the UGTT-owned Amilcar hotel often hosts civil society events, one ATFD member told Poloff that the recent seizure and subsequent expulsion of a Swiss Amnesty International activist from a May Amnesty International conference at the Amilcar resulted in even the Amilcar to be unavailable. During the remarks of a UGTT official attending the opening session, ATFD members raised signs on which they had written "Amilcar" in order to protest the Amilcar's unwillingness to host the ATFD event.

¶4. (C) Despite this minor disruption, the representatives of all civil society entities invited focused their remarks on the importance of disregarding group differences in order to present a united independent front to GOT harassment. Speakers expressed their solidarity with the ATFD and each other, as they seek to force the GOT to expand democracy and speed political reform within Tunisia. Several speakers denounced the GOT for its restrictions on its citizens' basic human rights, specifically freedom of expression and association. LTDH President Mokhtar Trifi congratulated the ATFD for being one of the few independent organizations that were able to convey a major meeting -- reminding attendees of the GOT's aggressive prevention of the LTDH National Congress on May 27 (Ref B). While there was additional discussion about women's rights, the negative impact of globalization on Tunisia, and expressing solidarity with "those living under occupation" in Iraq and Palestine, the speakers and the audience were clearly more focused on the deteriorating situation of independent NGOs in Tunisia.

¶5. (C) COMMENT: The assembled group provided unique insight into the strength and popularity of civil society activists. While the ATFD is generally a non-political organization that focuses on advancing a feminist agenda, its members were clearly politically informed and knowledgeable about the challenges and limitations on Tunisian civil society.

Attendees read opposition newspapers like "al-Mowqif" and "Attariq Aljadid," signed a petition supporting union members and read a statement circulated on a failed attempt by an unrecognized political party to register a new newspaper. The activist groups and officials in attendance were recognized and applauded by the audience, despite the underground nature and limited reputation of some. That so many were able to meet, express their solidarity and identify common challenges and goals, was a positive indication of the health of Tunisian civil society, which has been increasingly under attack in recent months.

¶6. (C) COMMENT, CONT.: It is noteworthy that despite the large gathering of civil society activists, the GOT elected to observe the event rather than disrupt it. This tactic is similar to those used before President Ben Ali appointed Mohamed Ali Ganzoui as Secretary of State for National Security, such as during the 18 October hunger strike in ¶2005. Given Ganzoui's recent removal (Ref A), this may be a sign of a less confrontational GOT strategy to control civil society activities. END COMMENT.
HUDSON